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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001000

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SUBJECT: HARIRI PUTS FORTH CABINET PROPOSAL, OPPOSITION
REJECTS BUT LEAVES "ROOM FOR DIALOGUE"

REF: BEIRUT 988

Classified By: Ambassador Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

11. (C) Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri on September 6 presented a 30-member cabinet proposal to President Sleiman without further consultation with the opposition. The plan, which did not meet the opposition Free Patriotic Movement's (FPM) demands for the ministry of the interior, the ministry of telecoms, or the right to name its own ministers, was described as "a national unity list" and "very balanced" by Hariri chief of staff Nader Hariri. President Sleiman is attempting to bridge the gap between Hariri's proposal and opposition demands, according to his advisor Naji Abi Assi, who said Sleiman senses Hariri is attempting to push the "reset" button on the government formation process but that the president will urge him to continue his efforts. Progressive Socialist Party (PSP) leader Walid Jumblatt recommended that Hariri give the president time to review the proposal and consult with the opposition, and Hariri ally Kataeb announced its unwillingness to participate in the cabinet without an expanded role. While Hizballah Secretary General Hassan Nasrallah publicly rejected Hariri's move on September 7, the following day representatives of the opposition announced after meeting Sleiman that they will continue dialog, "in the national interest." Although the opposition, irked by Hariri's snub, has cried foul, some have told us they consider his proposal a basis for continued negotiation. End summary.

HARIRI SUBMITS CABINET
DRAFT TO SLEIMAN

12. (C) After failing to force the FPM to accept his conditions to participate in the cabinet, on September 6 Hariri presented his 30-member cabinet proposal to President Michel Sleiman without further consultation with the opposition. Hariri's chief of staff and cousin Nader Hariri confirmed to the Ambassador that, contrary to FPM demands, caretaker Telecommunications Minister Gebran Bassil was omitted from the list and the telecoms portfolio was given to a majority party, the PSP. According to Nader, FPM MP Alain Aoun and FPM-allied MP Farid al Khazen were named to head the ministries of Public Works and Education, respectively, while the remaining three slots for AouQ}ealth (Mohammad Jawad Khalifeh), and Youth and Sports (Ali al-Abdallah). Hizballah's share comprised Mohammad Fneish (Energy) and Hussein Hajj Hassan (minister of state without portfolio).

13. (C) Nader described the cabinet proposal as "a national

unity list" and "very balanced," although he admitted that Hariri was concerned about the already lengthy government formation process. "It can't look like we're the obstacle," explained Nader, who reported that Hariri would wait "one or two days" for a response from Sleiman, after which he would decide whether to decline the PM-designate role and lay the groundwork for his renomination as PM (reftel). According to Hariri media advisor Hani Hammoud, a "way out" of the current impasse would be for Sleiman to reject Hariri's formula and then for Hariri immediately to present a new formula that incorporates the results of further negotiations with the opposition. Nader admitted that the cabinet proposal was still open to discussion, but reiterated Saad remains intent upon reaching a resolution quickly.

SLEIMAN AIMS FOR CONSENSUS

14. (C) Sleiman's cautious reaction to Hariri's move is to try to bridge the gap between Hariri's list and opposition demands, according to presidential advisor Naji Abi Assi. Abi Assi told the Ambassador on September 8 that the president sensed Hariri's move was an effort to push the "reset" button on the government formation process, not to force cabinet formation over the opposition's objections. If strong resistance by the opposition rules out the president's accepting the proposal, he will ask Hariri to continue his

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efforts to form a government by either amending the list "slightly" so that it truly becomes a national unity government or by attempting to convince the opposition to accept Hariri's proposal even if they "find the list lacking." Sleiman believes that the next government must be a unity government that is accepted by the opposition, according to Abi Assi, who added that although Hariri is pushing Sleiman for an immediate answer, the president is discouraging him from submitting his resignation too quickly.

PSP MP Wael Abu Faour, who visited Sleiman on September 8, told us afterward that Jumblatt and Sleiman coordinated to convince Hariri not to resign immediately. Even though there is no formal time limit for the president to provide his views, Abi Assi insisted that Sleiman would make his response "quite soon." Abi Assi was echoed by Khalil Karam, presidential advisor on francophone issues, who told the DCM that the president was taking 48 hours to consult with the opposition about Hariri's plan. Karam also claimed Sleiman had told him that he would talk to Syrian President Bashar al-Asad at the end of the 48-hour period before announcing his decision.

15. (C) Sleiman wants to play a consensus-building role in government formation and would not sign off on a cabinet that did not have the agreement of all sides, assessed Caretaker Interior Minister Ziad Baroud in a September 4 meeting with the Ambassador. "We don't have an option of a one-color cabinet with problems in the streets," Baroud said, referring to the political and security realities of Lebanon, adding, "Hizballah has the cards." Baroud insisted, however, that FPM leader Michel Aoun's absence from the government formation process would not prevent a final agreement and might even facilitate it.

HARIRI ALLIES WARY OF HIS PLAN

16. (C) PSP leader and on-again-off-again Hariri ally Walid Jumblatt told the Ambassador September 7 and 8 that he preferred that Hariri be patient. Jumblatt voices concern about Hariri's apparent willingness to present his resignation and embark upon the renomination process. Jumblatt also said he did not want his party to take the telecoms ministry, suggesting that it go to Aoun or one of the President's nominees. Instead so that the PSP would not be accused of profiting from Hariri's plan at the opposition's expense. Although local press reports indicated

that Hariri's proposal had advance backing from Jumblatt as well as Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea and Kataeb Party head Amine Gemayel, Gemayel's son MP Sami Gemayel told us September 8 that the plan was not coordinated with Kataeb and that he would refuse Hariri's nomination (as tourism minister) unless offered a more important ministry or two ministries for his party. MP Nicola Fattoush also did not hesitate to criticize the PM-designate, accusing Hariri of painting himself into a corner. Should Hariri seek re-nomination as PM-designate, Fattoush warned polchief on September 8, he would not be guaranteed the support even of his political allies because of intra-coalition jostling over the cabinet list presented to Sleiman. (Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea, however, downplayed this possibility, noting that Hariri would almost certainly garner support from at least the requisite 65 of the 128 MPs for a renomination. Caretaker PM Siniora, meeting with the Future MPs, highlighted the constitutionality of Hariri's actions.)

OPPOSITION SLAMS HARIRI'S
MOVE BUT MAY NEGOTIATE

17. (C) Hizballah SecGen Hassan Nasrallah in a televised speech September 7 rejected Hariri's move, insisting that the proposal did nothing to solve the government formation crisis and only further complicated the situation. He accused Hariri of not making any concessions in talks and insisted that there was no law preventing allocating cabinet seats to candidates who lost the elections, a clear reference to Hariri's refusal to include Aoun's son-in-law, Gebran Bassil, in the new government. FPM deputy Alain Aoun told us September 7 he did not believe Sleiman would accept Hariri's proposal and even if he did, Aoun insisted, the opposition would resign from the government. Alain Aoun, who was named public works minister in Hariri's proposal, nonetheless described the plan as a basis for additional negotiation. Ali Hamdan, aide to parliamentary Speaker and Amal Party leader Nabih Berri, blamed the USG for pushing Hariri to

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submit his cabinet proposal to Sleiman without opposition approval. On September 8, a delegation from the opposition including Bassil, Amal MP Ali Hassan Khalil, and Hizballah MP Hajj Hussein Khalil visited Sleiman and issued their rejection of Hariri's cabinet proposal, although they expressed their willingness to continue dialog "in the national interest." A range of contacts assessed that no threat of violence is imminent.

COMMENT

18. (C) Hariri's conversations with us and his allies increasingly suggest that his goal in taking this risky step is to reset the clock on negotiations. He misstepped in his negotiations with the FPM by conducting a futile media war, and he does not believe he can back down from his public rejection of the FPM's claims without losing face and credibility. Although Hariri may have hoped to walk away from the presidential palace with a clean slate to begin negotiations again, it appears that the president is now seeking to bridge the gap. Although the opposition, irked by Hariri's snub, has cried foul, they may consider his proposal a basis for continued negotiation if Hariri can restrain himself from resigning and seeking re-appointment as prime minister-designate.

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